



ANA Logistics System Getting to Afghan Right

Lieutenant Colonel Steven Valeski, U.S. Army Reserve

“But when you leave, we are going back to the way we used to do it.”

- Anonymous Afghan officer

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PHOTO: PO2 Ramon Nieves, left, from Naval Air Station Patuxent River, MD, loads a weapons crate with help from Afghan National Policemen and a fellow adviser at an ANP Regional Logistics Center located in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan.

IN MID-2010, I was assigned as the senior advisor for the Afghan National Army (ANA) General Staff G4 (GSG4/Chief of Logistics). During the handover period with the advisor I was replacing, the GSG4 and the previous advisor and I were discussing a new process for managing a logistics function. After going round and round with us, the GSG4 finally said, “Okay, we will do what the coalition wants, but when you leave, we are going back to the way we used to do it.” In later discussions with some of his staff, they echoed similar sentiments about how they used to do things in the Afghan Army.

As I continued my advisory duties, I kept wondering if the system we were developing was really the best thing for the ANA. My previous training devoted a fair amount of time to understanding the culture as well as the mechanisms of the ANA logistics systems. But as I saw the way it really was, and not just the way it was written in their doctrine, it became clear that we were having a difficult time getting to a system that was right for the Afghan National Army. I wanted to answer the question, “How do we build an ANA logistics system?” not just the question, “What system do we build?” To generalize beyond logistics, the real question became “What process should we use to advise the ANA in creating a large, functional army?”

Understanding the Environment

Every operation order starts with a situation paragraph to explain as accurately as possible the environment the mission will be operating in. In Afghanistan, the realities are stark and somewhat discouraging. The history of Afghanistan is well known; when U.S. and Allied forces entered in 2001, after 25 years of war, Afghanistan was a land almost without hope. Even

seven years later, when the surge of forces began and the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan became operational, the challenges were and are immense.

It became apparent that the army we were building was composed almost entirely of illiterate young men. Few had ever been exposed to computers, and while cell phones were quite common, other forms of modern communications (fax, email) were very limited. The officer corps of the ANA consisted of some well-trained (under the Soviet system), higher-ranking officers and a small number of junior officers who had been trained by the U.S. and the coalition. The vast majority of middle-level officers were newly appointed (many from patronage), undereducated, with little or no formal military background. Many were former mujahedeen or Northern Alliance fighters. While competent fighters, they weren't necessarily good soldiers in the modern sense, or good logisticians.

Afghanistan has always been a poor nation. The last 25 years have ensured that Afghanistan remained at the bottom of all the key indicators of prosperity and health. As such, Afghans have

had to keep a mentality of scarcity and hoarding as a survival tactic. Even with the generous contributions of the coalition, they know that the good times could end at any time. This affects how they see their logistics system.

In conjunction with the hoarding mentality, the culture of corruption and distrust runs deep through Afghan society. A common theme heard from advisors is that everyone in the ANA, except the principle they are advising, is corrupt and untrustworthy. Their actions, in our eyes, are corrupt. But in the eyes of the Afghans, all the support that we are giving them is a gift. And gifts are shared with your "tribe." So who does it really harm if you keep a little something on the side for yourself?

While I am not sure we can really characterize Afghans as lazy, they are more than happy to let us do things for them. Advisors have come to calling that "pushing the easy button," and it is one of the key things we look out for and try to avoid. Sometimes the operational imperatives require us to act for the Afghans; however, in the context of building a national army, the more we do, the more counterproductive we are.



U.S. Air Force, Senior Airman Brian Ybarbo

LTG William B. Caldwell, IV, commanding general of NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, shakes hands with members of the Afghan National Army during a visit with the Logistics Embedded Training Team, Kabul, Afghanistan, 30 November 2010.

In the November-December 2010 issue of *Military Review*, Major David H. Park wrote in his article “Identifying the Center of Gravity of Afghan Mentoring” that the ANA is a top-down, leader-centric, consensus-seeking organization. Using that as a lens to help view the Afghans, the actions of the ANA begin to make more sense. I could see why staffers did not want to make decisions or show initiative, and why multiple signatures were needed to accomplish even the simplest task. They waited to be told what to do. In open conversation they would share what needed to be done, but no one would ever point a finger at someone and say he needed to do it. You could get an officer to agree that he should do something, but he would counter with, “If my boss wants me to do it, he will come tell me.”

When the ANA was being developed, the leadership at the time, both coalition and Afghan, envisioned it as being only a 70,000-man force. By the middle of 2011, the force was over 160,000 and growing towards 192,000. Political and security imperatives demanded that the initial focus of the ANA should be to field combat forces (infantry battalions). Now, as deadlines for transition away from coalition to Afghan National Security Forces loom, we have to go back and build the foundation under this house. That foundation consists of schools, logistics, doctrine, organization, and infrastructure to support a growing force.

“Right” Versus “Afghan Good Enough” Versus “Afghan Right”

So that brings us to what is the right way to build an army. We can break down the concept into three major methods. There is the right way. This would be the way a well-trained, disciplined, educated, professional army (like a Western army) would do things. There is what we called “Afghan good enough,” a short-term solution that gets the job done. As Park pointed out, this could be summed up by paraphrasing T.E. Lawrence:

“Better the Afghans do it tolerably than that we do it perfectly. It is their war, and we are to help them, not to win it for them.”

In May 2011, Nato Training Mission Afghanistan instructed us to stop using “Afghan good enough” and switch to “Afghan right.” At first I thought this was another case of political correctness, but

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as I thought more about it, I realized there was a significant difference. This wasn’t supposed to be just a change in verbiage, but a change in meaning. “Afghan right” meant enduring solutions developed and adopted by the Afghans, with coalition guidance. These had to be solutions that would last long after we left.

So the question becomes, how do we get to “Afghan right”? The answer is contained in the concept of cultural currents. Every society has its own cultural norms and practices. As a Western culture, coalition forces have a different military culture, one that has been preeminent across the globe for several hundred years. As much as we would like to, we are not going to change the entire Afghan culture to mirror ours in the few years we will be extensively involved in Afghanistan. We have to find a way to make their culture work for us. We may be able to make some small changes that, over many years and several generations, will add up to a big change in the end. But we have to get past the current threats, and create a stable, effective military, while the political will remains.

Getting to “Afghan right” is a difficult process. It requires much day-to-day interaction with Afghans, working through language and context barriers to openly and honestly discuss the issues. It means involving them early in the process of change and giving them the chance to share their ideas and insights. It is, after all, their culture and their country, and they understand it best. And it requires accepting their longer timelines, which tend to be well outside of our own.

In my short tenure as an advisor, I did see a shift developing towards this method. However, I saw some glaring examples of the coalition operating in a cultural vacuum. Someone would identify a problem and propose a solution. Staffs would analyze and adjust the ideas, developing an answer



PO2 Ramon Nieves, right, from Naval Air Station Patuxent River, MD, watches an Afghan National policeman fill out weapons paperwork at an ANP Regional Logistics Center located in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. Nieves is part of a NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan embedded training team developing a police battalion manning the logistics center and supporting policing operations in provinces throughout northern Afghanistan.

that was most likely based on how we would do it in our Western armies. The solution would be taken to the coalition leadership for approval and implementation. Only then would the ANA be brought into the process, and told this was the right answer to their problem. They would have the opportunity to provide input, but often, it was more about convincing them the solution was correct, rather than guiding them to an appropriate solution for their cultural realities.

Logistics Example

To return to the world of logistics, let me finish by giving an example of a system we imposed on the ANA and briefly analyzing how it went with or against the cultural currents. Historically, logistics has been done through a “push” system. In more modern times, technology and organization has allowed a “pull” system to develop. As logistics

development began in earnest in Afghanistan, the fundamental logistics doctrine the ANA was going to use had to be determined and codified.

Push logistics is a top-down, centrally controlled system based on relatively fixed rations being distributed through a time-based, predictable resupply system. Essentially, the logistics system is telling units, here is what you get, and make it last till the next resupply date. The shortcoming of the push system is that inevitably either too much or too few supplies are sent to any given unit.

Pull logistics is the opposite. It is based on bottom-up requests and the variable needs of the units. It requires a logistics system that communicates well and responds quickly. Pull logistics is more complicated and requires more coordination and integration but, when done correctly, is more efficient and effective, delivering the right supplies to the right place at the right time.

Four to five years ago, contractors were hired to begin writing the ANA logistics doctrine. Most of the contractors were retired or former military logisticians, so they turned to the doctrine they knew best, the NATO-style pull system. They created a system that depended on units requesting supplies, and the request moving up the chain of support to the first level that could fill it. What was not written into the doctrine was how to allocate supplies. The system is not based on monetary constraints, so units don't get budgets; they get allocations. Essentially, units are limited to a certain quantity of any given commodity.

As the doctrine was being implemented in the real world, this purely pull system began to morph into a hybrid system. If an allocation hadn't been set for a unit, the national level depot refused the item until one was established. Furthermore, some items could not be ordered at all but had to be pushed from the top down. These were primarily "shoot-move-communicate" major end-items being issued during initial unit fielding. These items were controlled by the coalition, but required a fielding plan from the ANA GSG4, before the central depots would issue the items.

What we created was a system that depended on literate, conscientious workers to process requests up a chain of command, requiring many layers of approval, that takes several weeks to reach the supply depots, and then more time to stage and ship items that, in many cases, were of a predetermined quantity anyway. We then further complicated the system and confused the ANA by saying certain items could only be pushed. And for items that were to be pulled, a centralized authority would establish the allocation.

Cultural Analysis of System

So did this hybrid system go with or against the cultural currents of Afghanistan? Let's briefly look at several areas to see the results.

Literacy. Because Afghanistan is a nation of less than 10 percent literacy, filling out all these request forms was limited to a very small number of logistics personnel. Because every item had to be requested on these forms, the number of forms being sent up the chain for approval saturated a system that was still immature. Forms were often either rejected because they were filled out incorrectly or lost in the paperwork shuffle as they wound through a half-dozen or more offices.

Centralized control. Request generation is decentralized, but approval often had to go all the way to the top. Logisticians were not empowered (trusted) to establish or adjust allocations at anything but the highest level. The GSG4, the Chief of the General Staff, and even the Minister of Defense himself would have to sign authorization documents. Also, units started going around the system straight to the Chief of the General Staff to get approval for requests, because they felt that would ensure or speed up the delivery of goods.

Consensus Seeking. No one trusts units to order only what they need, so they require (by decree or by practice) multiple signatures (up to a dozen sometimes) to get approval for supplies. The doctrine does not require that many signatures, but a tradition of shared responsibility and the belief that more signatures equate to more authority created a perception that they were needed. Even people who were not in the chain of command or support, such as advisors, were asked to sign the forms.

Scarcity. Depot commanders grade themselves on how full their warehouses are. They don't want to let things go unless they have to. It is very easy for them to ignore or refuse a request for supplies



Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers salute the national ensign of Afghanistan during a graduation ceremony at Pole Charkhi, Kabul, Afghanistan, 20 April 2011. The soldiers are assigned to the 215th Corps Logistics Battalion, Embedded Partnering Team. (U.S. Marine Corps, LCpl Robert R. Carrasco)

because they claim it is not authorized or the request was improperly filled out.

Communications. The ANA does not generally accept signatures on documents that are not originals, so fax or email requests, even when available, are not often used. This requires units to hand carry request forms between the various approving authorities and on to the depots in hopes of having them filled.

Afghan input and approval. While I can't say for sure how much involvement the ANA leadership had in developing the decrees and policies, I suspect that the contractors charged with writing the doctrine did so in an ANA vacuum. They looked at the U.S. system (especially the older system before we computerized many of our processes and forms) and built an almost mirror image. The first GSG4 I worked with, who had been in the position for over six years, didn't agree with much of it, preferring to revert to the way they used to do it during the Soviet and pre-Soviet era. One of his key staffers once commented to me that if units sent in their reports accurately, they would never have to request supplies, because the national level would just push down what was needed. The new GSG4 was involved in the writing of other logistics doctrine and so came to see the benefits of a distributed system. He is now struggling to implement it throughout the ANA.

Professionalism and empowerment. In 2010-2011, the ANA completed the stand-up of their various branch schools and are starting to produce a new generation of professional logisticians. Until they are well entrenched throughout the ANA, the shortage of professional logisticians who conscientiously do their work will continue to mean that the odds of a request actually being filled is probably less than 20 percent, based on data received from advisors who have tracked them.

Afghan Right?

Is the pull system as written in the ANA doctrine the right system? In the eyes of the Western advisors who have designed it, the answer is yes. Pull logistics, often with just-in-time delivery, has proven to be efficient in Western armies by reducing wasted supplies, reducing shipping requirements, and ensuring items are available when needed. In the long term, perhaps it will become effective in Afghanistan too. It may be the best system but not in the context of the current Afghan culture and technology.

Is it "Afghan good enough"? At the moment, it's not. The system cannot adequately respond to the logistics needs of the ANA, and requires continued, extensive support from coalition forces.

Is it "Afghan right"? Not yet, but they are making changes to the concept to make it work for them. Their tendency is to revert to centrally controlled distribution. As the coalition continues to transition functions to the ANA, I believe they will return to increasingly top-down rationed allocation of goods and materiel. The reality of a poor nation with limited budgets requires very careful allocation of resources. Units will have to learn to make what they are issued last until their next resupply comes along. If they know that each month or each quarter their ration will arrive, they can adjust. However, they cannot adjust to submitting a request, only to have it disappear into the bureaucracy of the logistics labyrinth, and have no idea whether it will ever be acted upon or when they might receive their supplies. Some things cannot be pushed because it is not possible to anticipate the requirements. But for those things that can, pushing the supplies will improve delivery time and rates, control expenditures, and provide predictability. Moreover, it will free up personnel and management resources to process, order, track, and deliver the items that must be pulled.

The Future

While I would not be so bold as to advocate a total rewrite of the Afghan logistics doctrine to a push system, I do believe it will continue to move in that direction because of natural Afghan tendencies. The practicalities of where we are today and the timelines we are working under do not give us the ability to make sufficient changes in the military culture that will allow a true pull system to work.

While the above discussion focuses on logistics, I think we, the coalition, must analyze our actions in all areas in which we work within the current Afghan culture. As we continue to develop ANA systems, we have to keep them simple enough that a military facing so many challenges can make them work, not only while advisors and contractors are right there helping them but also when we leave and the Afghans have to do it all by themselves. The solutions to which we guide them must be sustainable for Afghans and by Afghans. **MR**